

# About Face Program Turns Lives Around

**by Charles C. Foti,  
Orleans Parish Criminal  
Sheriff, New Orleans,  
Louisiana**

**T**he About Face program is an innovative, inmate life-changing experience operated by the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office in New Orleans. While characterized as a "boot camp" program because of the regimented discipline involved, the About Face program is significantly different. Most boot camp programs operated by correction institutions throughout the country are short term—averaging ninety days or less—and employ shock incarceration techniques in an attempt to reform offenders. These programs often receive high marks for visibility, but they fall short of achieving their real goal, which is to reduce recidivism by rehabilitating criminals.

## **Key Elements**

The About Face program has eight key elements:

- Commitment from participants
- Discipline
- One-on-one counseling
- Substance abuse programs
- Community service work
- Education

- Vocational training
- Life skills training

## **Selection Process**

Participation in About Face is strictly voluntary and subject to stringent requirements. The About Face staff receives five or six letters a week from the general inmate population requesting an opportunity to test for acceptance in the program. However, not all of the 4,400 inmates in Orleans Parish Prison are eligible; fully 80 percent are unsentenced and therefore ineligible for this program.

Participants for the About Face program are chosen from sentenced offenders after a rigorous screening process. The selection process begins with a computer-generated list of those inmates who meet certain criteria. The criteria include age, criminal record, time remaining on the current sentence, and the nature of the offense.

Typically, an inmate chosen for the program is male, between the ages of seventeen and forty years, who may have up to a five-year sentence, but must have at least six months

remaining of his sentence. The sentence may be a state or municipal sentence but must be for a non-violent charge. The inmate must also be in good physical condition with no significant physical handicap.

## **Evaluation, Counseling**

Once in the program, participants are required to complete a battery of tests to determine education levels and thirty-page interview on their personal history and experience.

**Trainees are allowed to participate outside the jail complex in activities ranging from community service work to synchronized running in citywide road races to marching in Mardi Gras parades.**

In general, 60 percent of the participants are found to test between the third and fifth grade level, and 40 percent test between the sixth and ninth grade level.

**O**ne-on-one counseling is an important part of the About Face program. Participants receive personal therapy as well as counseling for substance abuse that is patterned after the nationally known Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous program. Approximately 85 to 90 percent of the participants have a history of alcohol or drug abuse.

### **Program Uniqueness**

To reinforce the idea that the About Face program is indeed special, inmates in this program are called "trainees" and live in separate barracks, dress in distinctive uniforms, and even have a different diet. A separate environment is essential in order to eliminate contact with the general inmate population and enforce the disciplined schedule necessary for this program.

Trainees become part of a platoon which initially consists of thirty to thirty-five trainees. Each platoon begins and ends About Face training as a unit. At present, there are three platoons, for a total of 100 trainees.

Another unique aspect of this program is that trainees are allowed, with supervision, to participate in activities outside of the jail complex. These activities range from community service work to synchronized running in citywide road races to marching in formation in Mardi Gras parades.

Uniforms consist of bright yellow sweatsuits or military style flight suits for drill, study and work details. On more public occasions, trainees wear khaki uniforms and boots.

### **Staffing**

Each platoon is supervised by full-time drill instructors who lead military style drill and ceremony, conduct inspections, and oversee physical exercise and team athletics. The drill instructors are selected because of their prior military experi-

ence. Drill instructors must be at least twenty-one years old, physically fit, and high school graduates with the ability to instruct, discipline, counsel, provide leadership, display high morals, and act as role model. In addition, drill instructors must complete the same training academy as all other deputies and must become certified commissioned law enforcement officers. About Face drill instructors also wear a distinctive uniform consisting of military camouflage.

### **Daily Schedule**

A typical day for About Face participants begins with roll call at 5:00 a.m. Each hour of the day is strictly scheduled with activities including physical fitness exercises, educational/vocational classes, and community service projects. Even meal time is regimented, with alternating groups scheduled for clean up. In the evening, 10:30 p.m. signals lights out.

### **Participation Statistics**

When a trainee begins the About Face program, he is expected to stay a minimum of six months. It is a demanding program, and not everyone who starts the program completes it. Approximately one-third of those accepted into the About Face program are paroled or released early. Another third are dropped from the program. Of those dropped, almost 90 percent are dropped for disciplinary reasons, 6 percent are dropped for medical reasons, and another 4 percent are dropped at their own request. The

average stay in the program is nine months.

### **Education/Vo-Tech Training**

Trainees are required to make progress toward earning a general equivalency diploma and to develop other skills that will benefit them upon release. Trainees who cannot read or write are enrolled in a computerized interactive adult literacy program, known as PALS (Principles of the Alphabet Literacy). Once these skills are mastered, the trainee moves on to pre-G.E.D. classes, and finally to G.E.D. classes. Certified teachers on staff are used for tutoring. The barracks classroom is equipped with ten IBM personal computers which utilize a variety of educational software packages.

The Sheriff's Office has established a partnership with Delgado Community College to provide vo-tech training in the following subjects:

- Cooking I and II
- Carpentry I and II
- Human Development
- Introduction to Personal Computing
- Body and Fender Repair
- Developmental Reading
- Interpersonal Relations
- Basic Engine Technology
- Developmental English
- Cabinet Making

Sheriff Foti hosts award ceremonies periodically to recognize the achieve-

ment of the trainees. Family and friends of the About Face trainees are invited to attend the ceremony, along with criminal justice, school board, and city officials. At the most recent ceremony, each of the trainees received an award appropriate for his accomplishments, and several former trainees who had been released, returned to receive their awards. More than 100 awards were given out, including:

- Twenty-one adult literacy certificates
- Twenty-five G.E.D. certificates
- Eleven General Equivalency Diplomas
- Fifty-four Delgado College credit certificates

### **Community Service Projects**

Working on projects to improve neighborhoods throughout the city teaches trainees that they are part of the community and reinforces the idea that they owe a debt to the community. Projects include cleaning lagoons in City Park, assisting in the food drive, painting elementary schools, cleaning up playgrounds and repainting graffiti-covered bridges.

In conjunction with the city's health department, About Face trainees also help alleviate health, safety and environmental problems throughout the city. Trainees routinely board up fire-damaged structures, tear down crack houses, and remove trash and debris from vacant lots.

**T**he most notable project was a partnership between the Sheriff's Office and the National Home Builders Association. Trainees first demolished three abandoned buildings and, under the direction of the National Home Builders Institute, constructed Sesame House, a 2,800 square foot adult day care facility. During this ten-week program, trainees received detailed instructions in constructing a house from the ground up. This included everything from reading a blueprint to the basics of carpentry, painting, wiring, and plumbing.

In 1990, J. William Bennett, the Director of the National Drug Control Policy, toured Sesame House on his visit to New Orleans and met with the About Face trainees who worked on this project.

### **Follow-Through**

Trainees graduate through a three-platoon system. The first platoon is considered the elite and given the most benefits. The third platoon consists of new pickups and those trainees with attitude and discipline problems. A trainee can be demoted from the first platoon to the third and be required to start over.

Particular emphasis is placed on preparation for reentry into the free world. About Face trainees are required to make family and employment contacts that will provide them with stability upon their release. Louisiana law allows judges to recommend some offenders for About Face and permits the state

parole board to consider About Face graduates for immediate parole. No one who has gone through the program has been turned down on his request for parole.

### **Program Success**

Initial study indicates a recidivism rate of less than 9 percent. The Sheriff's Office is still in the process of developing a precise method of follow-up to determine the full effect of this program. It is not uncommon for former trainees to return to visit their drill instructors and "touch base."

**T**he success of the About Face program has generated interest both nationally and internationally. Judges, juvenile authorities, sheriffs, wardens and law enforcement officers from all across the country have toured the About Face facility. Foreign visitors have come from as far away as Germany, France, Great Britain, Zimbabwe, and South America.

For further information, contact Charles C. Foti, Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff, 2800 Gravier Street, New Orleans, Louisiana, 70119; (504) 827-8501.

***This article was reprinted from a program brochure prepared by the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's Office. ■***